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ABSTRACT

Traditional psychological theories are designed, in large part, to explain the behavior of white males, viewing female behavior as deviant or deficient, or ignoring it altogether. While special undergraduate topics courses, such as those on the psychology of women, address this problem in part, many institutions cannot afford to offer them. In addition, such courses might create the illusion that the psychology of women is a unique and different form of psychology. A more appropriate approach to balancing the curriculum may be to mainstream women's issues into all psychology courses. One such approach is to spend one class session on sexist biases in research. Students review the available literature on sex bias in research design, and then discuss the stages of the research process in which such biases can have an effect. Students then locate and critique an empirical article on psychology to identify examples of such biases. In courses covering the biological determinants of behavior (e.g., Comparative Psychology), students can be asked pointed questions to generate debate on sex bias, such as how sociobiology theory might interpret inequality and rape. Students can also be shown how environmental influences are underrepresented in sociobiology. In courses addressing behavioral abnormalities, discussions of gender differences in mental disorders, and the data on mental illness and marital status, should be included. Integrating women's issues into the psychology courses is the first step towards fully integrating diversity into the psychology curriculum. (PAA)

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The Teaching of Psychology with a Gender-Balanced Curriculum

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The Teaching of Psychology with a Gender-Balanced Curriculum

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Over the past 30 years the recognition of the rights and needs of women has surfaced in our society. The emergence of the feminist social movement has stimulated psychologists to reexamine the existing body of psychological research with respect to its relevance to women and women's lives. Psychologists are beginning to become aware of the deficiencies that exist in psychological theories with respect to human diversity. Traditional psychological theories are largely designed to explain the behavior of white majority males, while females and female behavior are viewed as either deviant and deficient or ignored altogether. Textbooks, with few exceptions, present distorted views of female behavior and abilities (Denmark, 1985). The above findings have lead to new areas of scholarly work which focus on the female life experience. In turn, an awareness has developed to include and integrate the experiences of women into psychology curriculums. Most courses in psychology currently provide little insight into scholarship on women.

Until recently scholarship on women has entered the curriculum primarily through special topics courses (i.e., psychology of women). There are a number of advantages to conducting specialized courses in the psychology of women. Firstly, it is thought to compensate for

the existing biases which might exist in other psychology courses. Secondly, such specialized courses expose students to the new research findings on women. Lastly, these classes tend to enroll well which is an economic advantage.

While special topic courses allow for an in-depth examination of women's issues and are typically well received by students, they bring with them some disadvantages. For example, many institutions cannot afford to offer an entire course on the psychology of women. Walsh (1986) found that less than one quarter of four year colleges offer a course on the female experience. In addition, these courses may only attract individuals who are especially open to and interested in these issues. Separate courses on women may also create an illusion that the psychology of women is a unique and different form of psychology. In addition, a token psychology course on women is not enough to understand all of the issues involving women. Special topics courses which focus solely on women are valuable, but may not be adequate to gender-balance the psychology curriculum. Adequately balancing the curriculum might best be accomplished by mainstreaming women's issues into all psychology courses. By mainstreaming these issues and topics into the curriculum all students will have exposure to a more comprehensive psychology program. Research on women has created a new body of knowledge; we need to reshape our understanding of the traditional curriculum to encompass this scholarship. There are several ways in which we can integrate women's issues and topics into many of the courses typically offered within a psychology curriculum.

Examples of Mainstreaming

Below are several examples for mainstreaming women's issues into psychology courses other than the psychology of women. These examples help to integrate the new scholarship on women into the entire psychology curriculum.

When teaching Experimental Psychology I spend one class on sexist biases in psychological research. The Experimental Psychology class is the perfect place to address the issues of sexist and racial bias in research. I begin the class by discussing the relationship between gender and science. At first glance, science appears untouched by sexual allusion. While science is in theory to be an objective search for the truth, a number of biases can interfere with the process. The values and ideologies of the society influence the search for truth as well as researchers doing the research. The influence of sex on science has been more widespread then many students would have supposed. I have the class read Grady (1981) and McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze (1986) for a review of the literature on sex bias in research design. In class we discuss the stages at which biases can influence the research process. I present examples of bias with respect to; formulating the hypothesis, designing the study, performing the study, interpreting the data and communicating the findings. We then discuss the literature on conducting non-sexist research. The students are asked to find an empirical article in any field of psychology. I then have the students critique the article for the types of sexist biases

we have discussed in the readings and in class. This exercise helps to sharpen the students skills for detecting and eliminating bias in research.

In my classes that discuss the biological determinants of behavior, such as Comparative Psychology or Introduction to Psychology, the topic of Sociobiology is bound to be discussed. Sociobiology is a theory which attempts to explain social behavior, relationships and organizations in animals and humans in terms of biological and genetically determined mechanisms (see Alcock, 1992 and Barash, 1982). Sociobiology claims the innateness of such things as sex differences and social roles and positions within the society. I present this theory to my classes and have them discuss the implications of such a theory. The implications generally generate a rather heated discussion, especially when I ask the class what sociobiology's interpretation of inequality and rape might be. I then lecture on some of the limitations of sociobiology; this critique involves a discussion of the questionable methodology that is used in sociobiology, which might lead to distorted research findings (see Bleier, 1984). The heavy reliance of animal models is discussed as well as the tendency for anthropomorphism. The criticism that sociobiology is highly selective with respect to the references that are cited is presented. Lastly, I point how the role of the environment is under-represented in the theory of sociobiology. I then discuss the many diverse findings with respect to how the environment can influences both the structure and function of the brain as well as behavior.

Material that I discuss in my Psychology of Women class on psychopathology can easily be integrated into a course on Abnormal Behavior. It is important that when you discuss psychological disorders in class that you discuss the epidemiological patterns associated with a given disorder. That is, present to the class the data on gender, race, and marital status. For example, women are more likely to experience depression than men. On the other hand, men are more likely to abuse substances. The issue of gender is central to any discussion of mental illness. The epidemiological data should raise questions in class about the social and political meanings of psychopathology. Using the epidemiological findings you can develop a better understanding of the relationship between abnormalities and gender. It is also important to point out the various explanations for the higher rate of mental illness among women. Firstly, it should be pointed out that the precise definition of mental illness will influence the observed gender difference. Secondly, it is critical to the discuss the data on mental illness and marital roles. This data allows you to go beyond a purely biological explanation of a disorder and allows for an examination of the relationship between gender roles and mental illness. Lastly, it is essential to discuss biases that exist with respect to diagnoses. It has been suggested in the literature on gender and psychopathology that there might be a double standard in mental health, this class is the perfect place to discuss such a notion.

I have found that when I introduce research on women into courses other than the psychology of women, students are extremely eager to learn about these topics. I also experience satisfaction

about reaching more than the self-selected group of students who take my psychology of women course. While transforming the curriculum sounds like the solution to the inequality, there are some disadvantages that need to be considered. Faculty members may not be professionally current on the new scholarship on women. Colleges and universities would have to invest time and money in retraining programs. In addition, faculty members may not be interested in and/or willing to incorporate the new scholarship on women into the courses they currently teach. Textbooks would have to be restructured to be more gender-balanced. Some professionals argue that the psychology of women material and traditional mainstream psychology could never successfully fuse.

Even though a transformed curriculum is needed, transforming a curriculum is a difficult task that will require much time and energy. It seems obvious that separate classes on the psychology of women serve a purpose in that they bridge the gap between a unbalanced and a balanced curriculum. We can use the separate courses on the psychology of women as a catalyst to mobilize resources for the more complicated task of mainstreaming this new research into the curriculum.

The goal is to integrate, that is to create a curriculum which stresses the diversity of human experience by including issues and information about gender issues. By integrating women's issues into the psychology curriculum we are taking the first step towards fully integrating diversity into the psychology curriculum.

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